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ABSTRACT

Children today do not have sufficient association with the elderly to form accurate impressions of them. Much children's information is provided through television and books which present stereotyped images of the elderly as inactive, lonely, nonproductive, crabby, and physically decrepit. To determine whether intermediate grade students respond differently to young and old people, 144 boys and girls in the 4th, 5th, and 6th grades examined pictures of a young man, old man, young woman, and old woman, recording whether they though these people appeared sick or healthy, ugly or attractive, rich or poor, happy or sad, and friendly or unfriendly. The students also answered five questions designed to assess their willingness to socialize with these two age groups. Results indicate that children do stereotype the elderly. While old people were rated more favorably in the adjective section of the survey, they were rated worse in the affective feeling responses, suggesting that children's lack of contact with the elderly may cause their social discomfort. Findings indicate the need to help children develop more realistic attitudes towards the aged, through greater exposure to the aging process and to old people themselves. (LP)

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Children's Descriptions of and Attitudes Toward the Elderly

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CHILDREN'S DESCRIPTIONS OF AND ATTITUDES TOWARD THE ELDERLY

Stereotyping of the Elderly

Stereotyping of the elderly creates negative attitudes toward both the aged and the process of aging. Widespread prejudice toward the elderly by both children and young adults has been verified by a number of studies over the past few years. (Tuckman and Lorge, 1953; Click and Powell, 1976; Seifeldt and others, 1977 and Fillmer, 1982). It has been suggested that children do not develop such prejudices through associations with elderly persons because they do not have frequent associations with elderly persons. (Jantz, et. al., 1977; Shechan, 1978). Two of the most influential vehicles for providing information to children about the elderly are books and television. Not only do these media provide information, but they also help to shape attitudes.

Age Stereotyping in Children's Literature

A number of investigators have examined children's literature to discover what type of information about the elderly is presented. The results are discouraging. In an investigation that allowed fifth

graders to study aging; Storey (1979) allowed pupils to read books with elderly characters and describe the way the characters were presented. Their responses indicated that the elderly in the stories did not have fun, were sad and lonely, were crabby and fussy and were treated as if they were incompetent.

In another study Storey (1977) provided examples of stereotypes and negative images of the elderly in children's literature, as reported in research investigations:

1. Elderly people are depicted as inactive, or are shown as engaging in housework, fishing, walking, listening, or storytelling.
2. Such adjectives and adverbs as "old," "wrinkled," "crippled," "babbling," "mean," and "crabby" are used in referring to the elderly.
3. White hair and bent-over bodies typify the physical characteristics ascribed to the elderly.

In an extensive analysis of ageism in children's books Ansello (1978) found that only 16.46% contained older characters. Of the older characters that were included only 17.9% were principal characters. More than half the time no occupation was shown for old characters. Of more than 22,000 illustrations fewer than 1% showed older characters alone. The adjective, "old," accounted for three-fourths of all physicial descriptions of aged characters in the books included in the study.

Age Stereotyping on Television

No less important than books in impacting information and influencing children's attitudes is television. Research indicates that

children view television on an average of 40 hours per week. By the time they graduate from high school, pupils will have spent 11,000 hours in school and 22,000 hours in front of the television set. (Moody, 1980)

Age Portrayal on Television.

Regretfully, the elderly are also portrayed negatively on television. Arnoff (1974) studied 2,741 characters in prime time television programs over a period of 2 years. Fewer than five percent of the characters were older people. The omission implies that old people are not doing anything sufficiently interesting to be shown on television. When elderly do appear they are usually villains or victims. Appearances of the elderly on commercials are primarily to advertise age-associated products such as vitamin tonics, denture adhesive, laxatives or wrinkle removing cream (Francher, 1973).

Myths and Facts About Aging

Fortunately, citizens entering the ranks of the elderly today are redefining the notion of old. They are generally better educated, better satisfied with themselves, healthier, wealthier and more active than elderly in previous generations. According to Comfort (1977) problems of aging have very little to do with psysiological symptoms. "Biological aging accounts for only 25% of the difficulty. "The real problem is the attitudes we have toward people who are no longer young--attitudes that affect their behavior."

Purpose of This Study

Research indicates that today's children do not have enough associations with the elderly to form accurate opinions and attitudes of them. Self reports of young people demonstrate the same stereotypes of the elderly that appear in the media. It was the purpose of this study to investigate whether children in the intermediate grades respond differently to photographs of a young man, young woman, old man and old woman.

Procedures

Pupils in the fourth, fifth and sixth grades of a university laboratory school were selected to be subjects for this investigation. After pupils who had participated in a unit on aging in the primary grades were excluded, 74 boys and 70 girls remained as subjects in this investigation.

The investigator worked with pupils in groups of four or five. Pupils were given answer sheets and practiced responding on the sheets. Then they were shown a picture of a young man (age range 22-28), old man (age range 60 plus), a young woman (age 22-28) and an old woman (age range 60 plus). While pupils were looking at each picture, the investigator asked pupils to respond on the answer sheet whether they thought the person in the picture was sick-healthy, ugly-attractive, rich-poor, happy-sad, or friendly-unfriendly. Answers were on a five point scale as follows:

1	2	3	4	5
very sick	somewhat sick	neither sick nor healthy	somewhat healthy	very healthy

The adjectives were used to assess the pupils' objective description of the person in the picture. A score of three would be neutral. Above three would be more favorable, below three would be less favorable. Scales alternated between having the favorable adjective at the beginning of one and the unfavorable adjective at the beginning of the next. This was done to keep the subjects from falling into a rote routine.

The investigator then asked five questions to assess the affective feelings of subjects toward the person pictured, such as--

1. If you saw this person on the street, would you say, "Hello," to him or her?
2. Would you like this person to be your friend?
3. Would you like this person to sit next to you on a bus?
4. Would you like this person to watch you play?
5. Would you like this person to help your teacher?

The answers were on a five point continuum as follows:

5	4	3	2	1
always	almost always	sometimes	seldom	never

The scales were written so that the favorable and unfavorable responses were placed alternatively at the beginning and end of the scale. The questions investigated subjects' willingness to socialize with the person pictured and elicited a different type of response from that of selecting appropriate descriptive adjectives. Each subject responded to a total of eleven items each with a score ranging from one to five.

The reason for using photographs was to elicit pupils' responses to the elderly unobtrusively. At no time did the investigator make any references to old people or young people. During the course of the investigation, no references of this type were made by any of the children.

An analysis of variance was used to analyze the responses. Adjectives and questions were treated separately, boy and girl responses were treated separately and responses to male and female and young and old people were treated separately.

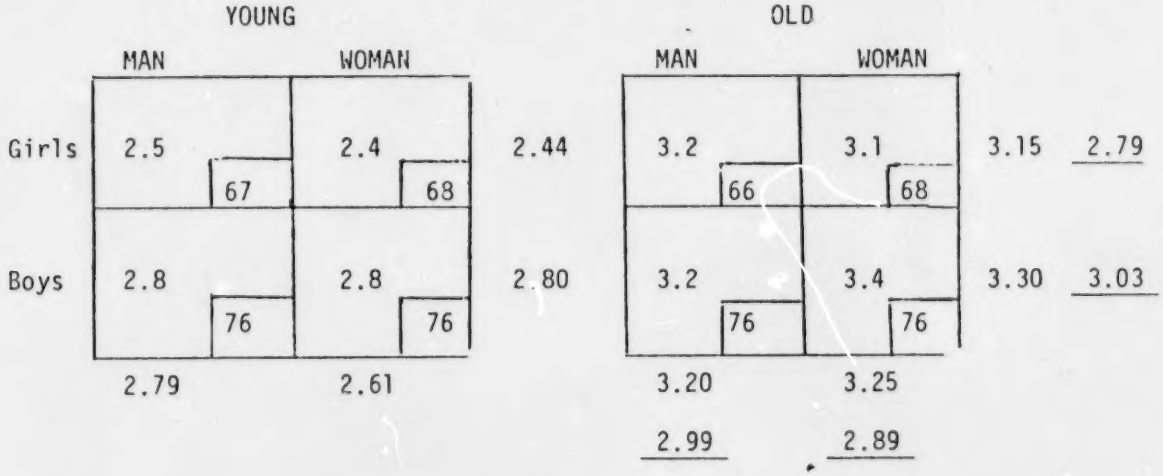
Findings

An analysis of variance was used to compare differences between the responses of boys and girls in describing and answering questions about young and old men and women.

Adjectives. Figure 1 shows the mean ratings of adjectives by pupils to describe young and old adult men and women.

Figure 1

Mean Description Scores of Boys and Girls in Describing Young and Old Men and Women



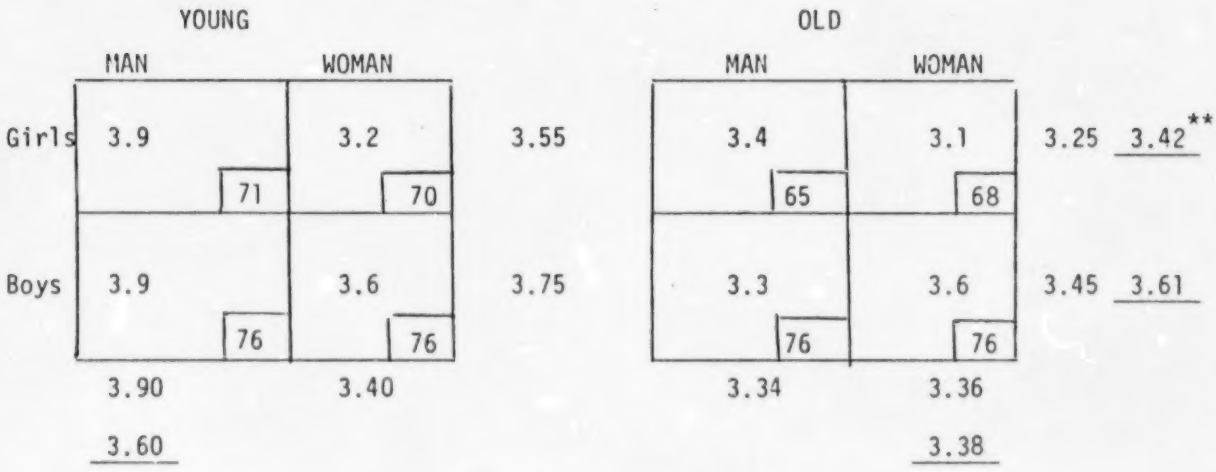
The scores shown in the center of the blocks are mean ratings. A rating of 3.0 is neutral, 1 is the lowest and 5 is the highest. The numbers in the lower right corner of each block represents the number of pupils responding to the item. The entire left block represents adjective ratings of younger men and women. The right block represents adjective ratings of older men and women. Girls' ratings are on the top half; boys' are on the bottom. Men's ratings are on the left half; women's are on the right. Numbers at the bottom and right of blocks are average means for each block. Underlined numbers are combined means for both blocks. For example on the top half of the blocks, the scores 2.5, 2.4, 3.2 and 3.1 are girls' scores for each category. The 2.44 to the right of the first block is the average of the two means in that block. The 3.15 to the right is the average of the two means in that block. The 2.79 underlined on the extreme right is the mean average of all four girls' means.

The data indicate that boys and girls rated old people more favorably than young people in their choice of adjectives (F 84.14, .001 level). There is an overall sex effect in the scores of adjective ratings favoring women over men (F 8.04, .005 level). An examination of the means indicates that the consistently higher ratings of women by boys are responsible for this difference (F 5.22, .02 level)

Questions. Responses to questions were organized in the same manner as responses to adjectives. These data are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Mean Responses of Boys and Girls to Questions Regarding Young and Old Adults



There is an age difference, but unlike the adjectives, the questions favor younger people (F 13.54, .0003 level). There is an interaction (F 84.14, .001 level) indicating that the age difference results from the disproportionately high rating of the young man by both boys and girls. The data also show that men were given much more favorable responses, overall, than women (F 4.49, .036 level).

In comparing the choice of adjectives with the answers to questions, the answers to the questions were generally more favorable to everyone than the choice of adjectives (F 164.16, .001 level). In both adjectives and answers to questions boys tended to make more favorable responses than girls to everybody (F 20.71, .001 level). Although the young adults were rated higher than old adults overall, the questions were generally more favorable to the older adults than were the adjectives (F 128.11, .001 level).

Yet in comparing question responses to young and old, the young received more favorable responses (F 28.26, .001 level).

Summary

It was the purpose of this study to investigate whether intermediate grade pupils showed any differences in their choice of adjectives o· answers to questions about a young man, old man, young woman and old woman. In every case there were significant differences. A summary of the findings is as follows.

1. Overall, the pupils rated young adults more favorably than old adults. However, old people were rated more favorably in the adjectives, but young people were rated more favorably in the questions.
2. Man received significantly higher ratings than women. But, in general, boys ranked women higher than men, and girls ranked men higher than women.
3. Pupils gave more favorable responses to questions than they did to adjectives. The adjectives favored old people, but questions favored young people. There was a greater difference favoring older people in adjectives than that favoring the young people in questions.

IMPLICATIONS

This investigation found that young people do stereotype the elderly. Yet, in describing photographs of young and old adults, pupils

gave higher ratings to the old adults. In answering questions about whether they would like to associate with the persons pictured, pupils responses indicated they would prefer to associate with younger adults. Perhaps it is safer to describe older persons favorably than it is to associate with them. Since research indicates that many pupils do not have much association with the elderly, it might well be that the idea of associating with the elderly causes them to feel uncomfortable. This finding could support a recommendation that pupils be exposed both to consciousness raising sessions on the aged and the process of aging as well as elderly people. Many intergenerational programs designed to bring young and old together exist at the national, state and local levels (Parnell, 1980) for those who are interested.

The fact that women received higher ratings from boys and that men received higher ratings from girls does not appear anywhere in the literature reviewed. This finding could have many implications pupil assignments to teachers or group leaders and merits additional research.

The entire area of stereotyping of the elderly is of critical importance to educators. It is apparent from the literature reviewed and from the results of this investigation that children are learning stereotypes regarding the elderly. Efforts are needed to help children develop more realistic attitudes toward both the elderly and the aging process. Parnell (1980) has so aptly explained:

> This separation of the elderly from the mainstream of American society has had serious consequences in terms of the elderly as well as children and young people. Present conditions have deprived the elderly of opportunities to contribute

their knowledge and expertise in appropriate areas because they are "too old." Children, on the other hand are deprived of opportunities to develop healthy attitudes toward their own aging, or even to recognize that they themselves are part of the aging process.

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